



**EURYKA**

**Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing Inequalities**

**Prescriptive Report on Youth and Political Change  
(Deliverable 8.1)**

**Workpackage 8: Prescriptive Analysis**

**Workpackage Leading Institution: EuroAlter**

Submission due date: January 2020

Actual submission date: January 2020



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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 727025

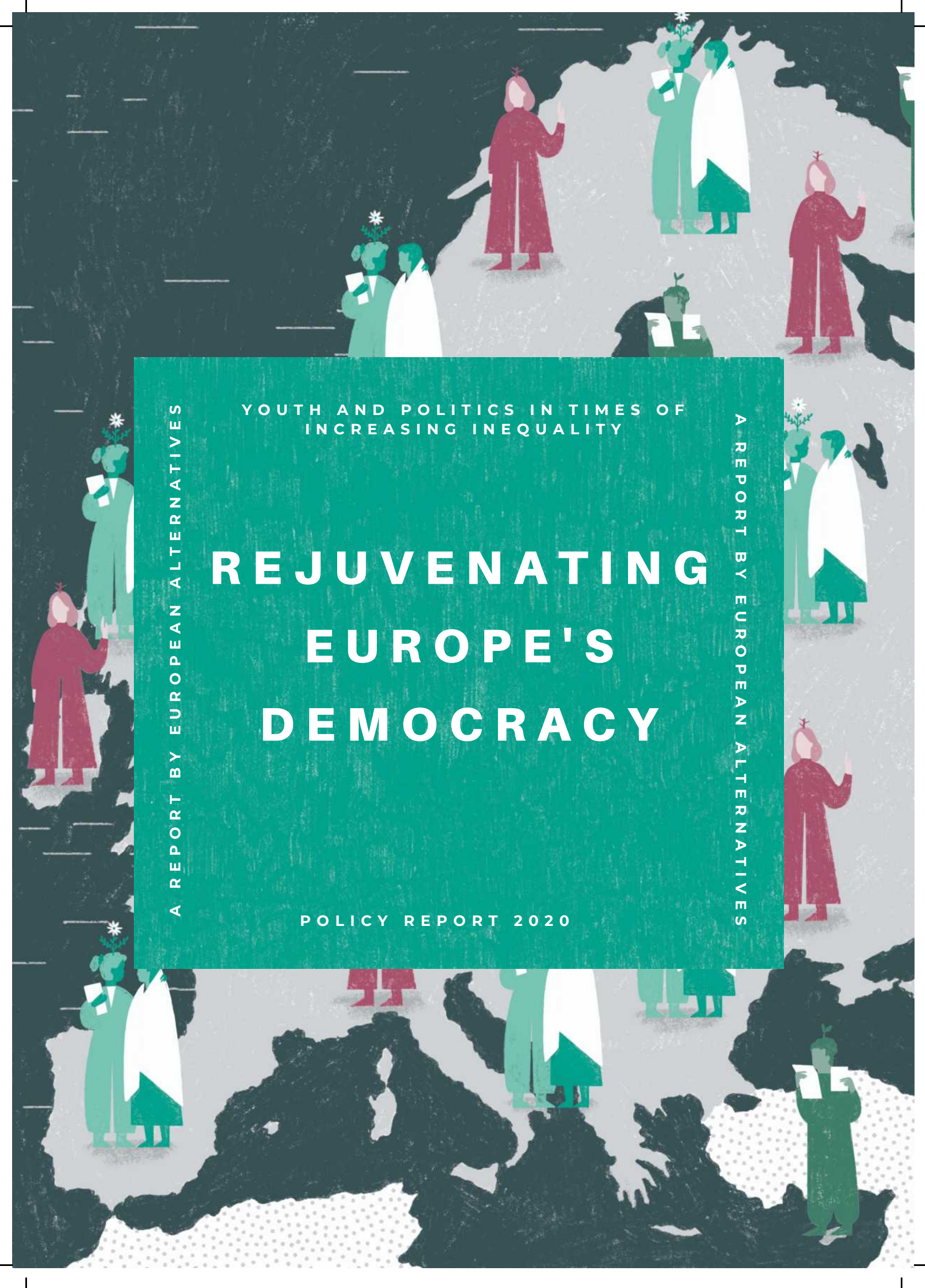
A REPORT BY EUROPEAN ALTERNATIVES

YOUTH AND POLITICS IN TIMES OF  
INCREASING INEQUALITY

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# REJUVENATING EUROPE'S DEMOCRACY

POLICY REPORT 2020





**Protesting, voting and engaged, or despondent, disinterested and dangerous?** Political stereotypes about young people abound in every society, and in Europe today the young generation is particularly at risk of being talked about by elders and the powerful, rather than attentively listened to and treated as equals. This policy report comes at the end of a significant three year transnational study of the way young people do politics in Europe today, in a context of rising inequalities, entitled EURYKA. The report outlines how the younger generations of Europeans have been particularly marked by a decade of economic and wider political crisis, which has combined with demographic change and the ageing of Europe's society to create a situation of generational structural injustice. It will propose in multiple policy domains - including the economy, environment, migration, urban policy, regional policy, education, leisure and sports, media and culture, and electoral rules - that specific action needs urgently to be taken to empower youth to bring positive renewal to Europe's political, social and economic settlement. History has returned to Europe, and the political agency of the younger generations will be decisive in how the continent navigates the future.

Key recommendations from the report, include:

- The young generations between 18-35 have suffered most of all age groups from the economic and political crisis of the past decade, and need holistic and generation-specific policy measures to address new inequalities.
- The young generations are at a structural disadvantage when participating in politics and public debate: a diversity of young people should be given leading and decisive roles in debates about the Future of Europe, about the future of politics and society in each country to address this structural disadvantage.
- Even after the worst of the economic crisis has past, young working people are significantly disadvantaged due to short term contracts, weaker protection of rights and weaker unionization: policy makers need to empower young working people to defend and advance decent working conditions and job security, through prioritising this in the European Labour Authority, at regional and national levels and creating youth ombudsmen.
- Young people have successfully put combatting climate change and protecting the environment to the top of the political agenda: European democracy has an interest in young people being politically empowered to play a leading and decisive role in how this challenge is met.
- Young people themselves are asking for more and better political and civic education to prepare them for participating equally in politics. European countries and institutions have a strong interest in investing in young people practicing democracy at school and in civil society organisations, as well as learning about the history of political change.

EURYKA is a three year (2017-2020) cross-national research project funded through the European Union's Horizon 2020 program. It investigates how growing inequalities mediate youth political participation, with a view to understanding the conditions, processes, and mechanisms underpinning how young people do politics: how do they form opinions and take actions to bring about social and political change? This research has taken the form of policy analysis, social media analysis, media analysis, biographical interviews, surveys and experiments in 9 European countries.

Led by the University of Geneva, other participating organisations are the University of Sheffield, Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence, Uppsala University, University of Siegen, Sciences Po, University of Crete, University of Warsaw, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and European Alternatives .

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An illustration of the European continent in a dark, textured grey color. The map is populated with numerous small, stylized human figures in three colors: red, green, and white. Some figures are holding books or papers, while others have unique headgear or accessories. The background is dark with some white dotted patterns in the lower right. A central green rectangular box contains the title text.

# EUROPE'S UNEQUAL YOUTH

# CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The 2019 European elections saw an increase in turnout largely thanks to the increased voting of younger citizens. According to the European Parliament's post-election Eurobarometer, young citizens under 25 increased turnout by 14 percentage points compared to 2014, and 25-39 year olds increased by 12 percentage points.<sup>1</sup> This is inline with the trend in Europe in recent years for lower abstention rates amongst young people in local, regional and national elections. What is more, young people were the most active in an unprecedented civil society mobilization to increase awareness and participation in the elections amongst the population in general. Perhaps most noticeably, many young people from across the world were active in setting the agenda for the elections through climate activism: the Fridays for Future movement and Extinction Rebellion obliged every major political party to speak about the climate issue, and put the Green Deal on the agenda of the new Commission.

Given all of this apparently good news about young people's involvement in European democracy, would it be a mistake to think that Europe's democracies work well for young people, and that increased participation shows broad confidence and satisfaction in the current system?

This was broadly the tone of several European parliament press releases after the election, and of the Eurobarometer report with chapter titles such as 'highest turnout in 20 years: the symbol of the EU's democratic good health'. Such self-congratulatory headlines show wilful blindness to the facts: most obviously, whilst abstention is falling, the majority of young people still do not vote (Eurobarometer puts abstention in the 2019 European elections at 59% for under 25s and 53% for 25-39s, whilst more than half of other age groups voted).<sup>2</sup> More dangerously, such a view would show complacency in deeply underestimating the frustration shared by many

young people – whether they voted or not – and misunderstand why and how young people are now doing politics.

This report will suggest that the youth of Europe are disadvantaged by structural injustice and are often misrepresented, misunderstood and less well protected than other age groups. If Europe's political institutions are unable to embrace a positive and transformative vision for the future of the continent and the world which addresses the concerns of young people and gives them voice and political agency over their lifetimes, evidence suggests that many of the youngest generation will do politics in a different way, some working for a positive vision but bypassing the institutions, others pushed to political extremes, and a majority disengaged and disenchanting.

In the end, Europe's political institutions at all levels face a familiar choice between *good* and *bad government*: either to embrace the transformative energy and optimism youth can provide to rejuvenate Europe's democracies and make them more just, representative and responsive, with empowered and well-informed citizens, or to rest immobile and unresponsive to changing historical circumstances, ignoring the concerns of the youngest generations, providing inadequate political education and opportunities to engage, and becoming more closed, intolerant, irascible and unjust as a result.

History is back in Europe, whether we like it or not, and everything from past experience in such moments shows that paying careful attention to the experience and voices of the youth is essential to a responsible government. Luckily, Europe has extensive cultural resources from its past it can deploy to help reflect on good government: in this report we reimagine the famous *Allegories of Good and Bad Government* painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico in 1338, to help illustrate the positive and negative scenarios for Europe's future.

<sup>1</sup> Eurobarometer Survey 19.4 of the European Parliament published September 2019 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/post-election-survey-2019-complete-results/report/en-post-election-survey-2019-report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See socio-economic annex of Eurobarometer Survey 19.5 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/post-election-survey-2019-complete-results/socio-demographic-annex/en-post-election-survey-2019-sd-annex.pdf>



**1. ACTIVIST**



**2. CRITICAL CITIZEN**



**3. INDIFFERENT CITIZEN**



**4. DISENCHANTED CITIZEN**



# CHAPTER 2 - EUROPE'S GENERATIONAL STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE

The youth generations have seen the worst impact of the post-2008 financial crisis and austerity. According to the IMF, before the crisis, people between 18 and 25 were roughly at the same risk of poverty as those over 64.<sup>3</sup> By 2018, young people in this age group were nearly 10 percentage points more likely to be poor; young people are by far the most likely to be living in poverty in Europe, and have the lowest median income of any age group.

The reasons for this situation are multiple: young people suffer more from unemployment and its effects are more long lasting; they are weakly protected against periods out of work because they

During the crisis social assistance programs became more targeted and means tested, meaning some young people lost out, parental allowances were cut in some countries, and non-pension related benefits were not indexed, resulting in loss in their real value. Whilst some measures were taken to relax criteria for access to unemployment benefits, and some youth-specific schemes were launched by governments and the EU during the crisis, the overall result of these and other gaps in social protection remains that young people have been most exposed to the effects of the financial crisis of all age groups.<sup>4</sup>

## **YOUNG PEOPLE ARE BY FAR THE MOST LIKELY TO BE LIVING IN POVERTY IN EUROPE, AND HAVE THE LOWEST MEDIAN INCOME OF ANY AGE GROUP**

have the lowest wealth; they are less well protected by unions, and often less empowered to defend their rights; they are regarded as less skilled, and by employers as more able to suffer unemployment than older employees who may have children or mortgages; and they are much more likely to be employed in the gig economy, informal or temporary employment.

More generally, Europe's social security systems were largely designed with the aim of supporting people in their old age, or in their earliest years, but much less so for young people in the period after their studies and in the first years of their working lives. Unemployment benefit systems offer less protection to young workers than older workers when there are eligibility criteria concerning the length of contributions, and in some EU countries young people without employment histories are not eligible for assistance. The result is that the share of young unemployed people receiving assistance is lower than for other age groups.

**If one of the lessons governments learnt slowly in the crisis was that the youth generation needed specific measures to provide social protection and promote employment, there is a danger that now the economy has improved in much of Europe, governments forget again to continue to pay specific attention to the youth, which still bears the scars of the crisis.**

Since young people are much more likely to be on temporary contracts and working in the 'gig' economy, and this increases their risk of unemployment, abusive working conditions, and sense of precarity which has deleterious political and economic effects for the whole population, **young people need to be involved in the political discussion about how to improve social protection and rights at work and whether all such contracts and forms of work are acceptable and decent. They need to be individually and collectively empowered through the support of their unionization and**

<sup>3</sup> See Hüttl, P., K. Wilson, and G. Wolff. 2015. "The Growing Intergenerational Divide in Europe." Bruegel Policy Contribution 2015/17, Brussels.

<sup>4</sup> IMF Staff Discussion Note 18/01 Inequality and Poverty Across Generations in the European Union.



**Young people have been most  
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financial crisis of all age groups**

**collective action. The new European Labour Authority and the Social Pillar of the European Union should make a priority of the empowerment of young workers to improve their working and social conditions.**

Young people have felt directly the effects of the financial crisis on their own work and education possibilities, but are also affected indirectly. To take one example, loss of income and lowering of health and social security provisions for older parts of the population have led to many young people having caring responsibilities for their older family members, affecting studies and work possibilities. Statistics are hard to establish because young carers are largely invisible to public authorities, but recent research has suggested a massive increase in young people acting as informal carers in the last decade, with percentage increases over 50 per cent often suggested in many countries.<sup>5</sup> **The issue of young carers, both children and people in early adulthood, is only slowly getting policy attention but is itself a significant demographic change which creates new inequalities.**

Over the past decade, many young people have had to move to another European country to find work, often moving to cities where they can find a job but are priced out of the housing and rental market. For many this has been less the freedom-enhancing adventure associated with Erasmus and studies abroad, and rather an involuntary, lonely and precarious struggle. **If the European Union is good at promoting mobility, and even established a service to match unemployed youth with employment opportunities in another country, it is inactive in ensuring that young people who do move receive orientation in terms of their rights at work in the country they move to, or that they are integrated and represented by trade unions and other worker organisations. This should be a matter of priority action for the newly established European Labour Authority, but is currently absent from its plans.**

Not only the social fabric, but also the environment and territory young people are growing up in has changed over the past decade. Young people have seen border fences and controls rebuilt where the older generation saw them taken down, and in

some cases have witnessed first-hand the human consequences of Europe's border policies, including for young migrants, whether that be at the territorial borders of the European Union, or in Europe's cities and towns when refugees have often faced a hostile environment. Fracking, deforestation, forest fires and extreme weather events, together with increased air pollution, have changed the natural environment. Increased privatization of public spaces, including squares and parks, in European cities and towns has changed the built environment that young people grow up in.

Whilst these changes to territory and environment affect everyone on the European continent and beyond, they have specific effects on the young generation. The privatization of public space limits places in which young people can gather and do sports, for example. Increased air pollution, has led young couples to change plans about when and where to have a family and bring up children. Degradation in the natural and built environment changes lifestyles now, but also changes the ways the younger generation imagines the environment they will live in later in life.

**To reinforce young Europeans' hopes for a livable planet in the future, European institutions and European countries need to give young people agency in reversing climate change and in protecting and reclaiming common public spaces and show ambition equal to the sense of concern young people show for the environment.**

The reintroduction of borders and aggressive bordering policies has led young people to pose existential questions about their own identity and values, about what it means to be European, the privileges and obligations that involves. For many young Europeans the sight of desperate migrants drowning or being detained has been deeply shocking, and this has produced diverse political reactions. **Europe has an obligation to adopt a migration policy which treats migrants decently and in accordance with human rights above all for the migrants themselves, but also for the wellbeing of young Europeans who witness this trauma and insecurity and for the integrity of European democracy and its value base.**

<sup>5</sup> See the We-Me project H2020 grant 754702 for ongoing research: <https://me-we.eu>



The youth generations of people under the age of 35 in Europe have been marked by these experiences in specific ways in comparison with other age groups over the past decade because of the stage of their lives which involves the transition to adulthood. Much sociological research suggests that these experiences will mark the world-views and attitudes of the current youth generations throughout their lives. Thus whilst the political topics that young people care about are often similar to those of the rest of the European population, including limiting climate change, migration policy, jobs and employment, security and democratic norms for example, both the way young people prioritise and the way they think about these topics is likely to be different to other generations, based on their specific experiences and stage in life.<sup>6</sup> To take one perhaps intuitive example, whilst older generations might see combating climate change and increasing the number of well paid secure jobs as a trade off (perhaps because they already work in such polluting jobs), younger generations are more likely to see how the green transition might create new kinds of jobs they could imagine working in themselves.<sup>7</sup>

It would be a mistake to think that these common experiences lead to all young people thinking the same way or having the same political opinions and preferences. Although younger voters in Europe in general tend to vote more green and inclined to the liberal and progressive side of politics than older voters, this is by no means the case for all of them: support for Jobbik has been twice as high amongst the youngest voters than amongst the rest of the Hungarian population, and Vox in Spain, the Swedish Democrats, the Italian Lega, and Kotleba in Slovakia all poll well with younger voters.

The young generation is increasingly internally divided and unequal socioeconomically. The experience of growing inequality over the past decade has affected different groups of young people differently, with the most vulnerable experiencing the greatest loss. Even in countries where the economy has weathered relatively well the economic crisis, such as Germany, inequality between young people has risen: it is estimated for example that there is a much greater inequality of disposable income amongst young people in Germany aged 15-35 now compared to people of the same age in 1970.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, there is growing

evidence that awareness of greater exposure to risk changes dramatically the political attitudes of young workers, meaning that even in European countries with relatively high employment rates, the most vulnerable and precarious young workers may compare their situation with what is happening in other European countries, and vote for parties promoting nationalist views or closed borders with a view to protecting themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The aging of the European population means the political economy of Europe is not promising when it comes to addressing the concerns of young people. On average, voters under the age of 30 only make up 18.6 per cent of the electorate in each European member state, and over 40 percent of the EU's population is over the age 50. It would in principle be possible to win elections in any European country without winning the vote of anyone under the age of 30. This must lead to questions about how well European democracies currently represent and give voice to the youngest generations.

Overall, young people are at a social, economic and political disadvantage, which has resulted in the past decade of crisis in being on the losing end of structural injustice. The ways young people relate to and do politics have necessarily adjusted to this changed context. Two overarching policy recommendations about youth political representation follow from these considerations:



<sup>6</sup> For recent studies of political priorities amongst young people in Europe see 'Young Europe 2019' study by Yougov for the TUI Stiftung, and Flash Eurobarometer 455 European Youth Jan 2018

<sup>7</sup> Special Eurobarometer 479 Future of Europe – Climate Change, Oct-Nov 2018

<sup>8</sup> See IMF Staff Discussion Note 18/01 Inequality and Poverty Across Generations in the European Union

<sup>9</sup> See for example Zagorski, P., Rama, J. and Cordero, G. (2019) 'Young and Temporary: Youth Employment Insecurity and Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties in Europe', *Government and Opposition* 1-22



**It would in principle be possible to win elections in any European country without winning the vote of anyone under the age of 30**

**The debate on demographic change in Europe needs urgently to address how to politically empower the youth generation that has suffered most in the economic crisis.** Even if unemployment is lower and the economic crisis is not as severe now as in previous years, the political effects of the crisis on young people will remain over decades. Early signs from the shape of the new European Commission, and the discussions on the design of the Conference on the Future, tend to involve the youth generation in a symbolic and accessory way, paying lip-service to the idea of the importance of youth through consulting groups of them rather than genuinely empowering members of this generation or NGOs to propose deep structural change to Europe's economies, societies and political structures based on their experiences in losing out from the current arrangements.

Given demographic ageing on the one hand and the formative experience of the economic and political crisis on young people on the other, **the European Union as a whole and European countries need long term and holistic strategies for empowering the youth generation,** which otherwise risks not having its grievances heard or acted upon. 'Empowerment' is one of the EU 'youth goals' as part of the new youth strategy, but the EU work plan considers only actions concerning youth work as part of this priority. Youth work is very important, but is only one precondition of political empowerment, which also requires structural change: **without rebalancing the economic, political and social inequalities weighted against youth in Europe, other youth promoting-activities are only compensatory.**










# CHAPTER 3 - WHO SPEAKS FOR THE YOUTH?

If the youth generation has had a hard time over the past decade, this has not gone unnoticed or undiscussed in the public spheres and political debates of Europe. There was wide discussion and awareness of high youth unemployment, the phenomenon of NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training), difficulties for young people to get on the housing market, and in Central and Eastern European countries in particular of the 'youth-drain' of young people leaving to richer EU member states. In some countries some of the ways young people

currently lose out socio-economically have been used as arguments for promoting pension reform, and arguments about the debt burden for future generations has been used to motivate fiscal consolidation; in other countries politics has increasingly shown signs of demographic panic and has led to more active family policy; and the EU made various initiatives to focus policy-maker attention on youth, from the youth guarantee to the new Youth Strategy. But to what extent and in what ways have young people themselves been able to be involved in these public debates?

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Analysis of major newspapers in nine European countries between 2013-2016 conducted for the EURYKA project can provide some answers. The countries analysed were France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. 5 major newspapers and tabloids were chosen, ensuring balance in terms of their political views, and around 500 instances of claims about, regarding or by young people were analysed for each country. The most salient results of this analysis include:

-  **Other actors speak on behalf of young people:** 21% of claims made in the media about youth were made by youth themselves, and more than three quarters made by other actors, like the government, businesses, education stakeholders, political parties and others.
-  **The State most often speaks for the youth:** The views and actions of governments, the judiciary and other state actors concerning young people are more often reported than those of young people and youth organisations themselves in all countries apart from in France where young people prevail, and Germany where state actors and youth actors are roughly equal.
-  **Young adults in transition from education to work have difficulty being heard:** When other people and organisations are talking about young people, they are most likely to talk about teenagers and school students, but when youth organisations and young people are in the media, they are more likely to be talking about university students and young adults.
-  **Young people frequently raise the issue of barriers to their political participation:** Young people and organisations in the media are around 10% more often voicing youth political participation issues, and 10% less often talking about education issues than other people and organisations who speak about youth (even if education is still the number 1 topic for both youth and non-youth actors talking about youth).
-  **Young Europeans are shut out of public discussion in specialized areas** like education, economy and welfare, extremism and law and order issues: in these areas specialized actors and actor-alliances with a specific mandate dominate public discussion.



## IF YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT ABLE TO GET THEIR OWN VOICES HEARD IN THESE IMPORTANT DEBATES ABOUT YOUTH, THAT LEAVES OPEN THE POSSIBILITY OF BEING EITHER IGNORED, OR INSTRUMENTALISED BY OTHER POLITICAL ACTORS



**Youth act on the ground:** Youth organisations and actors are more active at local and regional levels, whilst governments, state actors, professional associations, employers and other economy related groups and civil society organisations are more likely to be national in scope when they make youth claims.



**Young people act on issues which touch them directly and society as a whole:** young people were actors making claims in the media on issues like education and socio-economic concerns, but also through protests and activism on health issues, environment, migration and other issues.



**Different dimensions of youth inequality are important in different parts of Europe:** inequality features in about one quarter of all media articles concerning young people, but in Southern European countries socio-economic and political inequality is more present, whilst in Northern European countries, discriminatory inequality is more important.



**Youth tend to be portrayed in non-political ways in the media, and when they are spoken about politically, it tends to be negative.** Above all state actors, but also non-state actors, including young people themselves, tend to talk about young people in other ways than as political actors or as making political claims.



**Most political claims made by young people in the media come from the more educated and socially included, and social media has not changed this tendency of the mainstream press.**



**Young women are predominantly discussed in the media in terms of their health and bodies, and young women themselves rarely given an active or political voice.** Whilst the theme of gender equality in work gets some positive coverage, activism of young women was a peripheral theme with strongly negative coverage, and the overwhelmingly core themes of political claims in the media were about young women's health and sexual assault, discourses dominated by State actors, the judiciary and medical professionals.



**Civil society organisations manage to give voice to a diversity of young people's claims and points of view in the media to an extent no other organisations do.**

## YOUNG PEOPLE ARE DEPOLITICIZED BY THE WAY THEY ARE TALKED ABOUT IN THE MEDIA

Youth-related public discussion has been important in the media over the decade of the crisis: the EURYKA study shows that between 2010 to 2016 up to 25 % of claims in the media were made about or by youth in some of the countries under study (notably Poland, which varied significantly between 7% in 2010 to 25% in 2016, and France between 12% in 2010 and 23% in 2015). If young people are not able to get their own voices heard in these important debates about youth, that leaves open the possibility of being either ignored, or instrumentalised by other political actors. The frequency with which political participation issues were raised by young people in comparison with other groups shows that at least some significant numbers of young people have understood their own political disenfranchisement.

In France, where young people were able to speak more in their own voices in the media, this was because of a varied media landscape which included two newspapers (L'Humanité and Le Parisien) which regularly featured these voices. **Supporting media pluralism, through legislation and public financial support, is clearly vital to promote youth political voice.** In general left-leaning newspapers were more likely to give voice to youth agency.

In Sweden, where young people had particular difficulty speaking in their own voice, particularly on welfare-related issues, we might hypothesize that a paternalist welfare model empowers other actors like the State to speak in the place of youth, and it would be an important recommendation that **state actors in such places are self-critical and open-up to young voices.**

Analysis of the research results also suggests that **young people are depoliticized by the way they are talked about in the media.** When young people are mainly considered an object of debate rather than agents and protagonists of social, economic and political change, and when young people acting politically are spoken about negatively in the press, there is reason to think that young people disengage. On the other hand, **the more public debate welcomes the political action of young people, the more young people are active, use their voice and engage in protest activities.** These tendencies have been shown to be similar for migrants and unemployed people of all ages, other categories of people who also tend to be delegitimized and disempowered. In the case of youth the political disempowerment is all the more striking because media coverage of youth in other respects than their political agency tends to be positive, with the exception of law and order issues. This shows that the way other actors talk about youth influences the opportunities young people have for political participation, and provides another part of the explanation why a majority of young people in Europe today may not feel able to participate politically on equal terms to other parts of the population. **State representatives and others speaking publicly about youth political participation have a responsibility to speak positively even when - especially when - such participation is critical or contestatory, as it often is.** Multiplying the occasions for youth voice and genuine participation in decision-making may be the best political strategy for transforming youthful critique into long standing engagement rather than despondency.

**THE MORE PUBLIC DEBATE WELCOMES THE POLITICAL ACTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE, THE MORE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ACTIVE, USE THEIR VOICE AND ENGAGE IN PROTEST ACTIVITIES**



## YOUNG PEOPLE AND POLITICAL INFORMATION

Surveys of young people conducted through the EURYKA research project show alarming trends in the quantity and quality of the political and social information and news young people are receiving. The younger a European is, the less likely she or he is to read a newspaper, watch TV news, listen to news on the radio, or even search for political information on the internet. That youth voices are so poorly represented in mainstream media may be part of the reason. There is a danger of the youngest generations of Europeans being politically unaware and ill informed, and therefore more exposed to making decisions based on rumour and hearsay and more easily manipulated. To address this situation **Europe needs to invest in quality civic and political education and literacy in schools, promote a diverse and plural media environment and in particular support media developed by young people themselves and training programs to empower young people from diverse backgrounds to speak in and access the media and its networks.**

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

It is often thought that social media has provided a new public sphere which is particularly suited for young people, and has opened up new opportunities for young people to engage politically. The results of EURYKA research tend to complexify and nuance these commonplaces. Firstly, survey evidence suggests that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are used just as much, if not more, by older generations of Europeans than by younger generations, who are more present on Instagram and youtube than their elders. In some countries younger generations are more likely to discuss or share political opinions on social media, such as France, Germany, the UK and Italy, but in other countries this is not the case, like Greece and Poland. Secondly, there is little evidence that increased online youth diversity or activism breaks through into the mainstream press, which is still dominated by certain voices and agendas of the most powerful and privileged. Thirdly, there is evidence to suggest that young people with intolerant attitudes have found on the internet a new space for expression of their views which



were silenced before and there is little reason to think online participation alone does anything to reduce or challenge this intolerance. Indeed, a pioneering study of the social media conversations on the topics of women's rights and the environment across 9 European countries shows a picture of an online political struggle for hegemony, in which different groups representing different views attempt to establish dominance less through reasoned discussion and exchange, but rather through selective reposting, liking and following. In most countries these social media exchanges were highly male dominated, although in Italy and Spain women managed to reclaim centrality in the discussion of women's rights and were as active as men in the environment discussion.

Politically active young people themselves seem to be under no illusions about the nature of social media, based on interviews with them, and talk about social media either as a supplementary source of information or as a space for broadcasting their views, but as no replacement for physical meeting and activism. It is notable that young people who are active both online and offline tend not to have intolerant views.

Policy recommendations following from this analysis would be to **not idealise the social media or think it can replace other forms of political community and communication, to see it as place of inequality and political struggle, which young people need to have skills to responsibly navigate and in which weaker and less advantaged voices need support, including training and empowerment.**







REJUVENATE OR  
DEGENERATE: FUTURES  
FOR EUROPE'S  
DEMOCRACY



# CHAPTER 4 - HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE DO POLITICS?

The EURYKA research conducted a large survey across 9 European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and UK) across all age groups over the age of 18 to understand political attitudes and behaviours. The results show that young people in Europe are politically engaged, but not in the same ways as older generations. If young people are less likely than older people to vote in Europe, they are just as likely, if not more likely, to be involved in civil society organisations, particularly on women's rights and LGBTQ+ issues, on the environment and human rights.

part of EURYKA show that young people often become politically aware and active towards the end of their school years and in university. Survey data shows that young people between 18-24 are the most optimistic about the degree to which they can influence government decisions, with cynicism growing in older generations, reinforcing how important this moment in life is for democracy. Those young people interviewed who are part of civil society and political organisations often become involved in such groups through contacts and friends already being part of them, suggesting

## YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE ACTIVE POLITICALLY THROUGH ORGANISATIONS ARE ABLE TO CONCEIVE OF THEMSELVES AS CONTRIBUTING TO COMMON OR PUBLIC GOOD, RATHER THAN SEEING THEIR ACTIVISM AS SOMETHING WHICH ONLY CONCERNS THEM AND THEIR OWN PRIVATE INTEREST

Young people are considerably more likely than older people to be involved in non-institutional political participation such as assemblies, strikes, protests, boycotts and petitions. In all the countries of the survey young people are less likely to be part of a trade union than older generations, but in many countries particularly the youngest people in the surveys, between 18-24 years old, are as likely if not more likely to be members of political parties, showing a regain in interest in party membership amongst the youngest. Perhaps this corresponds with a greater diversity of political parties to engage with, as well as a general greater sense of the importance of party participation and the role of politicians.

Biographical interviews of young people involved in civil society organisations, activist groups and young political parties conducted as

**that it is important to promote and support such organisations throughout the European territory, to avoid zones of self-reinforcing disengagement where no young person knows any other young person involved in a civil society or political organization.**

Organisations which young people are part of often meet physically, in assemblies and other planning meetings, and this is often the point of introduction and induction into the life of the organisation: online participation and communication was at best seen as a complement to this real life meeting. Ideology was seen as less important for participants in all but party political groups, whilst almost all young active citizens emphasized how their activism was fully integrated into their lives and not a separate activity: they say it gives their lives a greater sense of meaning and fulfillment as

well as enabling them to learn skills. This suggests that young people who are active politically through organisations are able to conceive of themselves as contributing to common or public good, rather than seeing their activism as something which only concerns them and their own private interest.

Both survey results and biographical interviews have shown that the young people who become involved in civic associations, as well as young people who vote, are significantly more likely to have been involved in civic education at school and to have been able to practice democracy at school, through acting as a student representative or being involved in associations, political meetings or protests. Significantly, practicing democracy at school increased political activism of young people later in life through activities like protests, petitions, strikes and solidarity actions even when those young people had a low level of trust in the political institutions. This is not the case for voting, where civic education only increased voting when young people trust the institutions. **Promoting both civic education and supporting and enabling the associations, movements and groups through which young people can become active would therefore seem to be paramount policies for maintaining and building political participation of young people in times of historic change when trust in the institutions and politicians may be low.** The teaching and content of civic education is an issue of political controversy in several European countries in recent years (notably Spain, Hungary and Poland), and in all European countries curricula could be more oriented to practicing democracy in addition to learning facts about it, and learning and practicing the European dimensions of democracy. According to survey results, high percentages of 18- 24 year olds feel badly prepared by their education to participate equally in politics, suggesting there is a strong demand for better civic education.

Furthermore, EURYKA research shows that young people who participate in leisure activities, communities activities, religious activities or cultural activities all have a wider

repertoire of forms of political engagement (including petitioning, lobbying representatives, mobilizing, protesting, voting, etc) than those who do not. **In a context of growing inequalities between young people, promoting equal access for all young people to leisure and community activities is a matter both of fairness and justice and also democracy, since otherwise more privileged young people are more likely to learn more political skills, further reinforcing inequalities of political representation.**

Young people engaged in activism interviewed as part of the EURYKA research fear having to give up on their activism for career reasons, for family reasons or when moving countries. These reasons are likely to affect young people unequally in function of their resources and gender, but each is a reason that could be mitigated by policy change: **promoting forms of work which combine with or facilitate political engagement (including shorter working weeks), enabling young people to continue to be politically engaged if they move country through supporting European associations and the Europeanisation of civil society, and providing affordable and readily available child-care options could all mitigate the reasons young people often are forced to reduce their political participation.**



**HIGH PERCENTAGES  
OF 18- 24 YEAR OLDS  
FEEL BADLY  
PREPARED BY THEIR  
EDUCATION TO  
PARTICIPATE  
EQUALLY IN  
POLITICS**



# CHAPTER 5 - THE DANGERS OF BAD GOVERNMENT

The attitudes of the youngest generation in comparison with older generations show both alarming signals and signs of promise. The scarring of the economic and wider political crisis of Europe has created new political divisions amongst the younger population themselves, and between the younger population and the older population. The sharpness of these divisions, together with the ways EURYKA research shows that such tendencies can be reinforced, enable us to sketch two very different scenarios for the future of Europe and its democracies. Politicians and

There are also alarming signs of weaker support overall for democracy in France and Poland compared to other countries across all age groups.

Young people are more likely to think that democracies are not good at maintaining order, and significant percentages think that democracies are indecisive and have too much quibbling. The structural injustice that young people have suffered from during the crisis years, combined with a renewed sense that history is

## LESS THAN HALF 25-34 YEAR OLDS STRONGLY SUPPORT DEMOCRACY IN SOME COUNTRIES

policy makers in European, national and regional institutions all have a particular responsibility for addressing this situation, but here by 'government' we draw on a deep European humanist tradition of political thought in seeing *everyone* in positions of authority as responsible for overseeing the political health of the society: this includes not only state actors but teachers, social workers, journalists, intellectuals, artists, parents and young leaders amongst others.

One of the most dangerous signs revealed by survey research is the declining commitment to democracy as a form of government amongst younger generations. Whilst people over the age of 65 in all the countries studied endorse strongly the statement that democracy is the best form of government, young people under the age of 35 are more doubtful in all countries, and in some countries less than half of young respondents between 25-34 agree with such a statement. Young people between 18-24 tend to be more committed to democracy than the age cohort above them in many countries, although not in Spain, which might show the determination of the Indignados generation.

moving and dramatic change is possible, together with fading living memories of war and totalitarianism in Europe and insufficient historical education, are all likely contribute to these differences of attitudes between generations. In an age of increased geopolitical competition, in which countries like Russia, China and Turkey promote the advantages of authoritarian government, these anti-democratic tendencies need to be addressed. This shows the urgency of finding ways of **empowering young people in decision-making in Europe, adopting specific policies for young people which acknowledge that they are at a structural disadvantage in the economy, in society and in politics, as well as investing in quality citizenship education including notably historical education.**

Providing security at work and reducing precariousness in other ways by ensuring a functioning social security net are also important in preventing the radicalization of political views amongst young people, since evidence shows that both sudden loss of financial resources and the perceived risk of loss of financial resources or hardship increase extremism.



There is divergence between generations and between countries when it comes to attitudes to income inequality, and the government spending on social programs. More than 30 per cent of 25-34 year olds in Greece, Poland, Spain and the UK support larger income differences as incentives, and this is higher than other age groups in the country, and significantly higher than young people in countries like France, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland. In Poland nearly 60 per cent of the younger generations agreed that governments should decrease taxes and spend less on social benefits, at least 10 percentage points higher than other Polish age groups. This may be evidence that increasing economic inequality amongst young people - both because of the economic crisis and for Poland the broader post-1989 context of neoliberalism and joining the EU - has hardened attitudes towards income inequality. If these attitudes translate into frustrating Europe-wide policy efforts to address economic inequality, or even deliberately exacerbating it, this is likely to accentuate many damaging tendencies highlighted through this report.

There are also alarming signs that advances in women's rights which many had thought were secure in many European countries and on their way to being secured throughout Europe, such as the right to abortion, are under renewed pressure, with higher percentages of young people under the age of 35 believing that abortion should not be allowed in any circumstances than other age groups. In some countries, this change is particularly marked, such as France where 13% of 18-24 year olds and 9% of 25-34 year olds agreed that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances, whilst less than 4% of other age groups agree. Germany and Greece also show a significant jump between generations, with significantly higher percentages of younger people thinking abortion is unacceptable. Of the 9 countries studied, only in Spain is it true that the younger you are the less likely you are to think that abortion is unacceptable in all circumstances. Combined with indications that more members of the young generation are part of feminist and women's rights organisations than members of the older generations, as well as wider global trends and what can be observed online, there are strong indications that a political struggle over the right to abortion is ongoing amongst the youngest generations.

**Civil society organisations, human and civil rights movements as well as governments of countries where the right to abortion has been secured should be aware of this danger and putting resources into advocacy and information campaigns targeting young people, education in schools and in supporting women's rights groups.**



## YOUNG PEOPLE MAY BE LESS COMMITTED TO FREE MOVEMENT THAN IS OFTEN ASSUMED

Young people may also be less committed to free movement as a good than is often assumed. EURYKA survey data shows that young people in the seven of the nine countries surveyed are less enthusiastic about free movement as a principle than older generations. Only in the UK are young people more supportive of free movement than their parents, but - contrary to some Brexit stereotypes - people over the age of 65 are the most supportive, as well as the most likely to have lived in another country. In several European member states support is still high, with more than 60% of all age groups in France, Germany, Italy and Spain supportive of free movement, but in Greece support for free movement is under 60 percent amongst people under 35 years old, in Sweden below 50 per cent and in Poland below 40 per cent support. In Poland there is also higher support amongst young people than older people for limiting free movement for the sake of keeping public order. These figures, which would need to be confirmed by more research, suggest that **the European Union should not take youth support for freedom of movement for granted: it may need to do a better job of explaining the benefits, of empowering young people to have a genuine and free choice about moving or staying in their country, and of ensuring the economic and social benefits of free movement are justly distributed.**



# CHAPTER 6 - THE PROMISES OF GOOD GOVERNMENT

Evidence suggests that the young generation is the most optimistic about the possibility of influencing politics and government. The timeframe of the EURYKA study allowed a double wave of survey results to show this efficacy to not be fictive, as between 2018 and 2019 the number of people of all age groups prioritizing protecting the environment and combatting climate change increased dramatically, where previously it was only a priority for the youth. It is plausible to suggest that the Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion movements contributed significantly to this. Moreover (contrary to some stereotypes of youth attitudes) there is a widespread appreciation amongst young people of the need for politicians, and young people are involved in protest, occupations, campaigns, associations and political parties. The youth generation also tends in EURYKA survey results to be the most optimistic about the future economic situation, even if they are in many countries most exposed to hardships now.


Attitudes towards adoption by homosexual couples are the most supportive amongst the younger generations of Europeans, young people are supportive of the idea that people should take responsibility for their own lives, and report high levels of support for competition as a means of promoting innovation and new ideas.

**NEW FORMS OF YOUTH  
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION  
ARE ORIENTED TOWARDS  
CHANGING LIFESTYLES AND  
GETTING PERSONALLY  
INVOLVED IN AN ISSUE**

Each of these attitudes provides a basis on which European democracies can be rejuvenated, but this energy must not be betrayed by false promises or by paying lip-service to youth engagement without empowering youth to take decisions equally with older generations.

The new forms of youth political participation are oriented towards changing lifestyles and getting personally involved in an issue, whether it is welcoming migrants, planting trees, promoting gender equality or creating ethical versions of gig-economy type companies, as young people setting up their own delivery rider collectives have done, for example. The combination of personal activist implication with a willingness to engage in institutions should be the ideal for Europe's vision of citizenship. Such a vision of good government could involve, for example:

 ***Young people and youth organisations empowered to take part in decisions over rights at work and in internships: by including representatives of young workers amongst stakeholders in the European Labour Authority, by promoting youth representation in unions and collective agreements in industries, businesses and at national level.***

 ***Young people receiving special support on entering the workforce in terms of knowing their rights and being able to enforce their rights, through a youth ombudsman or similar.***





*Young people having a decisive say in the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe by having representation in the plenary sessions alongside social partners, parliamentarians and governments, as well as young people having a decisive role in any future European treaty change.*



*Young people and youth organisations empowered to take part in decisions as part of the Green Deal for Europe, through a process of youth-led assemblies throughout Europe to set targets of climate emission reduction and investment in green transition industries and jobs.*



*Young people who move able to fully take part politically in the countries they move to as well as the countries they have left, by creating transnational political parties, facilitating the creation of new political parties and ensuring political diversity through electoral reform.*



*Promoting forms of work which allow time for political engagement, such as shorter work weeks or corporate social responsibility and pro-bono time programs, not only in the professions.*



*Society providing child care not only prioritized for working time but also for political participation time.*



*Young women are particularly empowered and given voice by state actors, media and politicians, as are other young people who are at risk of intersectional discrimination.*



*Empowerment of local government, cities, municipalities and regions, which are all scales where young people can more easily be politically active than national politics.*



*Europe's regions get more equal attention, support and investment, reducing inequalities between European youth and meaning young people can freely choose whether to move to another country.*



*Europe's migration policy is humane and welcoming, and reinforces the awareness of historical obligation of young Europeans and the values of human rights the EU claims to stand for.*



*A diverse media environment in which small and citizen-led medias can also thrive both offline and online, since these medias are more open to diversity and carry youth voices.*



*A vibrant civil society with a wide diversity of civic organisations and political movements, in which the right to association, free speech and criticism of power and the powerful are protected and celebrated.*





**The combination of personal activist  
implication with a willingness to engage  
in institutions should be the ideal for  
Europe's vision of citizenship**







**SUMMARY POLICY  
RECOMMENDATIONS**





## OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS


 The debate on demographic change in Europe needs urgently to address how to politically empower the youth generation that has suffered most in the economic and wider political crisis


 Europe needs a comprehensive, holistic and long-term strategy to channel youth indignation and frustration into political and social renewal. This strategy must empower young people to lead a transformation of the structures of European society, democracy and economy so they have in their diversity an equally decisive say in the future as parts of other parts of the population, and so that inequalities between young people are also reduced

 Young people should have representation in the plenary sessions in the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe alongside governments, parliamentarians and social partners, and young people should have a decisive role in any future European treaty change


 Create a Youth Ombudsman in the European institutions or in each European country, to deal with youth complaints at work, in education, in the media, and in political participation, amongst others


 Extending the vote to 16 year olds is to be seriously considered to increase youth political voice and engage new generations early in democratic practices but it is no panacea to the deep and interconnected socio-economic and political problems of generational structural injustice youth suffer

 Young carers and young parents in Europe need special policy support to enable them to pursue their education, careers, leisure time and family plans, as well as to facilitate their equal political participation


 Empower local government, cities, municipalities and regions, which are all scales where young people can more easily be politically active than national politics, particularly in a context of global economic and political reorganisation

## ENVIRONMENT


 Europe needs to give young people agency in reversing climate change and in protecting and reclaiming common public spaces and show ambition equal to the sense of concern young people show for the environment

 Young people and youth organisations should be empowered to take part in decisions as part of the Green Deal for Europe, through a process of youth assemblies throughout Europe to set targets of climate emission reduction and investment in green transition industries and jobs

## SOCIAL PROTECTION AND RIGHTS AT WORK

 The youth generation needs specific measures to provide social protection and promote employment even when the overall European economy is doing better than in the previous decade of crisis

 The European Labour Authority and the Social Pillar of the European Union should make a priority of the empowerment of young workers to improve their working and social conditions

 Young people and youth organisations need support to take equal part in decisions over rights at work and in internships: including representatives of young workers amongst stakeholders in the European Labour Authority, and by promoting youth representation in unions and collective agreements



Promote forms of work which combine and facilitate with political engagement, including considering a 4 day work week and pro-bono and corporate social responsibility programs with political dimensions, and not only in certain professions

## **MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE**



Supporting media pluralism through legislation and public financial support gives more opportunity for the youth to have political voice, and in particular supporting youth-led media and civil society organisations can promote diversity of youth voice in the public sphere



Special attention should be paid to promoting the political voices of young women in the media, and ensuring public debate about young women does not focus disproportionately on body and health issues



State actors in particular should be responsible in not talking in the place of young people, and not being negative about youth political participation, even when it is critical and contestatory



Policy makers should see social media as a supplement not a replacement to other forms and forums of political discussion and communication; and the voices of those most at risk of discrimination online should be strengthened and protected

## **EDUCATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY**



European investment in quality, practice-oriented, civic, political and historical education and literacy, both in formal and informal education is consistently shown in the research to be one of the most important public policies to ensure young people can participate actively, responsibly and in an informed way in democracy and is an important demand coming from the young generation themselves who feel unprepared



Prevent backsliding on abortion rights by ensuring accurate information is used in the public debate, along with the history of how and why such rights were won by women



Civil society organisations are primary spaces of political socialization, education and political voice for the youth, and they require an enabling environment and funding



Ensure all young people have access to civil society organisations, leisure activities, and political activities during and after formal education, throughout the European territory, as a matter of justice and to promote a wide repertoire of forms of political participation

## **FREE MOVEMENT AND MIGRATION**



Ensure the economic and social benefits of free movement are more justly distributed across the population and territory of Europe, and ensure that Europe's regions get more equal attention and investment, so that when young people decide to move or stay, they do so freely



Europe must have a humane and welcoming migration policy, which is in line with the best traditions of its historical experience, not the worst, and reinforces and empowers attitudes of solidarity and responsibility amongst Europe's youth



Enable young people to continue to be politically engaged if they move country through supporting European associations, the Europeanisation and international openness of civil society and transnational political parties



# CREDITS

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EURYKA aims to study the relations between inequalities and young people's ways of doing politics and to advance scenarios for future democratic models and political systems in Europe that are more inclusive for young people.

All EURYKA research reports and outputs are available at this website:

**[www.euryka.rdi.uoc.edu](http://www.euryka.rdi.uoc.edu)**

This is a report by European Alternatives: **[www.euroalter.com](http://www.euroalter.com)**

Check the web-documentary "Political Youth" inspired by the stories, the results and conclusions of the research at: **[www.politicalyouth.eu](http://www.politicalyouth.eu)**



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 727025. The support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors.

